

Pentheus in *Bacchae*: puritan or prurient?

Scott Scullion

In the *Bacchae* Euripides makes Pentheus suddenly change from a persecutor of the female devotees of Dionysus to a man who is prepared to disguise himself as such a devotee in order to spy on the rites. In this article I discuss how we are to understand this transformation.

Pentheus returns to Thebes to find that its women have gone off to Mount Cithaeron to worship Dionysus. Encountering his grandfather Cadmus and the seer Teiresias, he accuses the latter of welcoming the introduction of the cult as an opportunity to profit from ritual fees, and of inducing Cadmus to join him in support of the god. Teiresias tries to defend the divinity of Dionysus by referring to the strange story of his birth, as well as to the benefits he brings to man; Cadmus tries a more cynical argument based on family prestige. Neither of these arguments persuades Pentheus, whomocks the old men for their maenadic get-up and sends followers to overturn Teiresias' seat of prophecy and to arrest the 'stranger of female appearance' (353) – the god himself, as we know and Pentheus does not – who has introduced the cult.

Seducing the women of Thebes

Most readers find Teiresias' rarified arguments apologetic rather than persuasive in effect, and Cadmus' motivation is plainly opportunist, so there is a certain plausibility, even if also a tremendous vehemence, in Pentheus' rejection. But what does Pentheus have against the cult in the first place? One thing above all, the corruption of the women of Thebes. Euripides gives him in passing other grounds of complaint – the incredibility of the story of Dionysus' birth (242–5), the cult's novelty (467) and its foreign provenance (483) – but his elaborate and heated objections are to the indulgence in wine and especially in sex that he imputes to the women. His first words are of their false Bacchic rites, which involve drinking and are merely a pretext for 'serving the lusts of men in the wild' (216–25), and he reverts time and again to that charge. When he confronts the 'stranger' he says 'first tell me who you are' (460), but that natural 'first' question is in fact prefaced by a lingering description of what strikes him as the stranger's sexual attractiveness to women (453–9), a nice piece of characterization. Pentheus' preoccupation is also obvious to those around him; the first messenger is well aware of it, and explicitly contradicts his claims (686–8).

From military commander to maenadic cross-dresser

This background seems essential when we come to consider the sudden change in Pentheus after he calls for his arms and begins to set in motion the military assault on Cithaeron that Dionysus himself in his prologue had led us to expect. That, as Jenny March has argued, is likely to have been the usual story – in vase-painting it is an armed Pentheus whom the maenads destroy – and is deliberately evoked by Euripides to point the novelty of the very different sequel in *Bacchae*. Pentheus' abandonment of the military option is certainly sudden:

Pe. *Bring me out my arms here, and you stop talking.*

Di. *Aaah. (Probably meaning 'hold on a moment'.)
Do you want to see the women sitting together in the mountains?*

Pe. *Very much so; I'd give a great weight of gold for that.*

Di. *Why have you fallen into great desire for this?*

Pe. *It would pain me to see them drunk.*

Di. *But nevertheless you'd look with pleasure on what's bitter to you?*

Pe. *Absolutely—sitting quietly under the fir trees.*

809–16

A key question about this remarkable colloquy is whether Pentheus changes his mind freely or under the god's compulsion. Many scholars have concluded that Dionysus here takes over, or at any rate begins to take over, Pentheus' mind; some think the god's extra-metrical 'Aaah' at 810 marks the precise moment at which he does so. But others disagree. E.R. Dodds famously commented that the question Dionysus poses 'has touched a hidden spring in Pentheus' mind, and his self-mastery vanishes': not an invasion from without, then, but something snapping within. These two interpretations correspond to conflicting views about Pentheus. Those who assume the god is invading his mind usually consider his concern about sexual misbehaviour on the mountain perfectly appropriate to a king in a society that kept women under watch and ward, and so see nothing strange or unhealthy about it. To Dodds and others it seems excessive: an anxious fascination, more prurient than puritan, that makes Pentheus' sudden alteration comprehensible without reference to divine agency.

Pentheus: slave of Dionysus or obsessive voyeur?

This is clearly an important issue. Are there indications in the text of which response Euripides was trying to elicit from his spectators? An answer might begin with the observation made above that Pentheus has little to say against the cult on any ground other than sexual wrong-doing, whereas on that subject he has a clear tendency to rant at length. It is surely telling that at the cardinal moment Euripides has Dionysus raise the possibility of spying on the maenads – whom Pentheus characteristically envisions as drunk (814) and as having sex in the thickets like birds (957–8). If the god were simply seizing control of Pentheus' mind, he might do so at any point; the poet's association of the change in Pentheus with the subject that has preoccupied him suggests an attempt to make the change humanly comprehensible. Surely Euripides is constructing a causal rather than a coincidental link between Pentheus' curiosity about maenadic immorality and the sudden alteration of his plans.

Various details are consistent with this suggestion. If Euripides meant the spectator to understand that Dionysus drives

Pentheus mad between verses 809 and 812, he has not made that clear. After the third stasimon Pentheus returns to the stage obviously raving; he is then fully under Dionysus' control and the god speaks to him with mocking irony. In the present scene, however, Dionysus' tone is quite different; he offers Pentheus a series of rational (or at any rate rationalistic) arguments for going to the mountain disguised as a maenad, apparently by way of inducing Pentheus to overcome a residual inner resistance. Indeed, he actually tells him a lie to that end. Though he will announce as soon as Pentheus leaves the stage that he wants the Thebans to laugh at the king as he is led through town looking like a woman (854–6), he claims to his face that he will lead him through deserted streets so the Thebans will not see him (840–1). This surely implies that Dionysus has not yet taken control of Pentheus' mind.

There is an even clearer sign that Pentheus is still making free choices. After he exits to make up his mind what to do, and before he reappears raving, Euripides has the 'stranger' invoke Dionysus: 'Dionysus, now it's up to you . . . First drive him out of his mind, putting a light-headed madness in him, for in his right mind he won't be willing to put on women's clothing, but driving off the course of sanity he will do so' (849–53). It seems perfectly plain here that divinely-imposed madness is still to come, and the change in Pentheus' demeanour when he reappears confirms that it has come between the two scenes. It is clear that something startling happens at 809–12, but it must happen in Pentheus himself, for Euripides introduces divine agency only subsequently, to get Pentheus to the transvestite stage. On the other view, what Euripides wrote must seem very misleading. Pentheus and the problem of inner conflict

We spoke of an inner resistance in Pentheus, and certainly what he says to Dionysus looks like the result of a conflict between a 'great desire' that has suddenly emerged and the restraints that have hitherto kept it (not quite fully) in check. 'I'd give a great weight of gold' is the impetuous hyperbole that marks the bursting of the dam. There follows the counteractive attempt to save face, 'it would pain me to see them drunk', but Dionysus' reply – 'nevertheless you'd look with pleasure on what's bitter to you?' – brings out the conflict of desire and restraint behind the logical paradox, and makes clear that the desire is predominant. If this is incipient madness, it is a madness Euripides depicts as generated by an inner conflict.

Pentheus is not unlike another doomed Euripidean youth, Hippolytus, whose rejection of Aphrodite shows him unbalanced. At his first appearance, and again when he confronts Dionysus, Pentheus speaks of the women and the god preferring or hunting Aphrodite (225, 459, cf. 236), whom he identifies with illicit sexual congress, an equally unbalanced view of the goddess, even if combined in Pentheus' case with exigent curiosity. Towards the end of Hippolytus, Euripides repeatedly and closely identifies the young man with the horses, 'reared in my stables' (1240), which shy at Aphrodite's monster and destroy him; thus the elaborate play on his name – 'destroyed by horse' – is made to point to his share of the responsibility for his own fate. A similar technique seems to be at work when Cadmus warns Pentheus of the example of Actaeon, torn apart by 'raw-eating dogs whom he reared' (337–42) when he offended Artemis. In both Hippolytus and Pentheus there is a lack of balance, all their own, that puts them in the way of trouble.

Further Reading

Jennifer R. March's 'Euripides' *Bakchai*: A Reconsideration in the Light of Vase-Paintings', *BICS* 36 (1989), 33–65 with Plates 1–4, is a very important and highly readable article, and an ideal antithesis to the view of Pentheus offered here.

Scott Scullion teaches Greek and Latin Literature at Worcester College, Oxford and is an expert on Greek religion.